

## Asger Jorn and the Photographic Essay on Scandinavian Vandalism *Niels Henriksen*

In the last few years the Danish painter, potter and sculptor Asger Jorn (1914-1973) has had a revival. He has been the subject of several publications and large exhibitions at The National Museum in Copenhagen and Arken Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen. Although Asger Jorn is sometimes presented as the Scandinavian exponent of post war Abstract Expressionism, he was really a movement of his own, consciously working against such categorisations, and arguing against abstraction in art. The artistic practices of Jorn are perhaps so defiant of categorisation because they rely on and exist in constant dialogue with a quite original theoretical framework, which evolved with the artist throughout his life. From the beginning of the 1940s onwards Jorn was the initiator of periodicals and movements and always an ardent supplier of manifestos and articles. The best known of these movements are the COBRA-group and the Situationist International.

The Situationist movement has, like Jorn, although rather independently of him, recently received a revival or interest, especially in the fields of architecture and urban planning, but also in literature and art. The first SI (Situationist International) was held 1957 at Cosio d'Arroscia in Italy, with participation of the LPC (London Psychogeographic Committee), LI (Lettrist International), the LPI (Potlatch LI) and IMBI (International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus). Central to the Situationist movement was a defiance of the "spectacle", the capitalist creation of artificial dreams and desires, and the realisation of every person as an artist. One suggestion for such a realisation was the *derivé*, an idea inherited from the surrealists, which is to stroll through the city without a goal or a route simply following one's hunches. If one afterwards delineated the *derivé* on a map, it would be a psychogeographic mapping. The SI had become rather inclined towards this geographical approach by the 1960s. Mappings are a Situationist archetype being auteur-less, de-centred pieces of information lying between image and diagram, expression and delineation, art work and document. At the outset in 1957 the leaders of the Situationists were Guy Debord (1931-1994) from the LI and Asger Jorn from IMBI; after Jorn dissociated himself from the movement in 1961, Debord established himself as sole leader of the movement.

The same year as Jorn dissociated himself from the SI, he established the Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism in Silkeborg, Denmark. The Institute was to be the centre of a large-scale publication of photographic picture-books on ancient and medieval folk art in Scandinavia. Historians and archaeologists were involved, thousands of photographs were taken, and Jorn coordinated and financed it all, and provided a philosophical framework for the project to inhabit. The ideas of the Institute are informed by Situationism, as a counter-modernist philosophy, as well as by Jorn's personal experience of the difficulty of co-operation across boundaries of culture and thought. As mentioned before Jorn had been inclined towards art theory long before going into the SI, and it is safer to speak of parallel lines of thought than to claim origins of certain ideas. Jorn and the Institute worked in compliance with the de-centred structure of the mapping and the *derivé* but also with a great sensibility to myth, to the un-spoken and the irrational. The Institute and the project of Comparative Vandalism ground to a halt around 1965, but what was produced in the context and in the aftermath of the Institute is immensely interesting as philosophy, as art, as science and as a photographic culture, the last of which will be the focus of this article.

### Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism

Asger Jorn founded the Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism in 1961 and his co-founders were Professors Peter Glob and Werner Jacobsen from the Danish National Museum and Holger Arbman from the University of Lund, Sweden. However as the project took shape it was the

French photographer Gerard Franceschi, the editor of *The Situationist Times*, Jacqueline de Jong, a couple of Danish amateur enthusiasts and of course Jorn, who engaged themselves most fully in the organisation's activities. The core objective of the Institute was the publication of a series of books called *10000 years of Scandinavian Folk Art*, the number of prospective volumes grew from sixteen to thirty two in the years the institute was active, from 1961-65. The only part of this project that was actually realized at the time is *Signes Gravés sur les églises de L'Eure et du Calvados*, a book on the influence of the visual language of the Nordic bronze age on twelfth century graffiti in Normandy churches. This was published in 1963 in Copenhagen and 1964 in Paris. However Jorn also wrote and published an outline of the wider ideological context in which the picture books on folk art would be set. This came out as five 'reports', three of which were published at Jorn's own expense in 1962-63 and the last two, which were not published until 1980.<sup>1</sup> These reports start out as a discussion with Nietzsche and Hegel on dialectics and aesthetic philosophy, and then it moves on to Engels and the material dialectic. *The Natural Order of Things*, the third report, was dedicated to a critique of Niels Bohr's complementary theory and the existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard. *Thing and Polis* discusses vandalism as a creative force characteristic to Scandinavia and introduces The Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism.<sup>2</sup> The final report *Alpha and Omega* elaborates on the creative force of vandalism by discussing Scandinavian art as driven by *mind* [Danish: sind] unpremeditated thought and feeling, the realm of dreams and imaginative thinking.

Needless to say this philosophy had a strong political scope as well as a regionalist one; Jorn continuously compared the cultures of thought in the Mediterranean, continental European and Anglican countries. The point of departure for Jorn was not nationalism but an artistic philosophy, which he had an almost religious approach to. The philosophy takes its outset in Scandinavian aesthetics and thought, but Jorn's whole way of thinking could be said to vouch for regionalism as such, which is an idea of international implications. Having detached himself from the Situationist movement in the end of the 1950s, because its other leader Guy Debord was moving away from the original artistic strategy towards a more political strategy, Jorn was really looking for a basis nearer to his own experience. He sought coherence between artistic practice and philosophical and scientific practice, in the hope that an interdisciplinary search could widen the field of visual knowledge. As a result the Institute's activities did not comply easily with scholarly practice. The 'reports' are composed as spiralling structures of arguments in an essayistic style, chapters being often little more than a page, building up an argument in a repetitive understated way.<sup>3</sup> The proposed thirty two volumes of *10000 years of Scandinavian Folk Art* were not to be archaeological or historical examinations but rather artistic surveys of an aesthetic phenomenology.

## Vandalism

In the project *10000 years of Scandinavian Folk Art* Asger Jorn set out to vandalise history as an affectionate response to the vandalist approach of the medieval artists he was dealing with. Vandalism is a complex term, which is explained in a number of examples. When Napoleon stole the Trajan column and took it to Paris, placing it on the Place Vendome, topped by a huge statue of himself resembling a roman emperor, that was vandalism. It could be called 'creative vandalism', because Napoleon is playing with the displacement and compilation of signs. Courbet disagreed with the message of this vandalist compilation of signs and he decided to vandalise it by demolishing the column. Not being physically able himself he encouraged the Communards to do it. They were however only interested in doing so because they could use the metal of the monument to make canons. Jorn divide the three vandals in this example, Napoleon, Courbet and the Commune by intention; Napoleon had an imperialistic, dictatorial intention and the Communards had a violent political intention. Both are symptomatic of French vandalism by being revolutionary. Courbet, on the other hand, was driven by an aesthetic, artistic force without any concrete reasons, an artistic vandalism resembling the Scandinavian vandalism Jorn was focussed on.<sup>4</sup>

In *Tegn og Underlige Gerninger* [Signs and Weird Deeds], which is largely concerned with church art and architecture, a set of motifs are discussed, for instance the woman with animals feeding off each of her breasts. A later example of this way of working was Jorn's last project on the *Didrik*, a hero figure in Scandinavian mythology, from which the illustrations for this article are taken.<sup>5</sup> These motifs are like an undercurrent of signs to the Christian symbolism of the Church, which means that they are not symbols working on an objective or conscious level of thought, rather they are alien in their context and counter-symbolic. Jorn worked with a division of visual language and, what could be called, visual pre-language, which are different levels of signification and experience. This did not comply with contemporary modernist art historical practices; Jorn developed an 'artistic-morphological method' as a complement to Erwin Panofsky's methods as early as the mid 1950s. This aesthetic of ambiguity and compilation is seen by Jorn as the foundation of a whole western tradition of morphological thinking, starting with Gothicism. Departing from the fact that stone churches on Gotland seems to have had wooden columns, Jorn discusses the mixture of stone and wood in Scandinavian architecture as an origin of the gothic philosophy, art and architecture. Thomas d'Aquino is cited for defining a gothic aesthetic as, "Beauty resides in a certain congruence of uneven elements."<sup>6</sup> Gothic Italian churches appear to have had large-scale wood ornaments and the gothic arch itself seems to have been modelled over a construction of bended branches. Jorn worked with a dialectic (and triolectic) of north and south as the clash of *mind* and *sense*, and in terms of visual representation it was the clash of *meaning* and *mannerism*.

### *Tegn og Underlige Gerninger*: a Photographic Essay

The thirty two volumes of *10000 years of Scandinavian Folk Art* were planned as picture books made in cooperation between a photographer, a historian or archaeologist and a 'composer'. The 'composer', Jorn himself, would have total control of illustrations, which meant directing the photographer to the objects of interest, editing the photographs afterwards and deciding in which order they should appear.

As mentioned above, the project had more or less been given up by the end of the 1960s due to lack of funding and a lack of understanding in the appropriate organs. In 1995 the National Museum in Copenhagen and the Museum of Art in Silkeborg revived the idea with the exhibition *Asger Jorn and 10000 years Scandinavian Folk Art*. Following up on the exhibition four volumes have been published in Danish and German.<sup>7</sup> In 1969 when *Tegn og Underlige Gerninger* was prepared for publication it must however have seemed like the swansong of the Scandinavian folk art project. The book was actually a compilation of a series of newspaper articles written by Jorn for *Demokraten* in 1968 and 1969 and as such it does not follow the planned norm for the project, neither was it published by The Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism. *Tegn og Underlige Gerninger* is as much a defence of the idea as it is an actual sample of what it could have been. In the end of the book we are given a sample of illustrations from Jorn's earlier book *Signes Gravés sur les églises de L'Eure et du Calvados*, mentioned earlier in this text. There are fifteen whole-page photographic illustrations taken by Gerard Franceschi and enhanced with a red line by Jorn, the image texts are written by the Norwegian archaeologist, ethnologist and sociologist Gutorm Gjessing. This sample is perhaps closest to the original vision of the Institute.

The illustrations of *Tegn og Underlige Gerninger* are taken from several individual photographers and scholars as well as from the National Museums of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The bulk of the illustrations, however, come from the archives of the Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism. The photographs are used in comparative series; we see the same motifs again and again in photographs from different churches. The medium is clearly drawn upon for its status as evidence, to establish that a certain motif or architectural characteristic was repeatedly used. The point of the extended use of photographs is to prove the displacement of certain signs and aesthetics from one region, time or material to another. All the photographs are black and white, and in their seventies, offset reproduction on glossy paper they appear rather flat, documentary and hardly very

attractive. Nine different sources for the photographs are given and as some of those are institutions there is bound to be an even larger number of photographers. As a photographic essay the images come over as a very uneven mixture, a few images, probably by Franceschi, are stunningly beautiful compositions with a strength of tonality that transcends the bad reproduction, these however are in the minority.<sup>8</sup> Many other images are rather flat and grim, and have been enlarged more than they should or copied one too many times. The book is not luxurious and as a whole the photographs can hardly be called evocative of the grandeur of Nordic aesthetics. However the Institute, and thereby Jorn, had made a point of building up an archive of photographs for themselves, taken by a photographer they had commissioned and this must have been because they wanted something specific. The photographs of stone- and woodcarvings are close up with the light cleverly manipulated so as to abstract from the object as a whole and focus on the carvings as images. This is a general characteristic that seems even more outspoken in the photographs taken from the Institute archive.<sup>9</sup>

Jorn addresses the subject of photographic documentation in this field of research in the end of *Tegn og Underlige Gerninger*. He criticises a contemporary publication, illustrated by Franceschi, in which the author presents the photographs as works of art themselves.<sup>10</sup> Jorn finds this very peculiar and sets off in a discussion of post-reformation Scandinavian over-evaluation of *the natural* as the highest in art. He suggests that the seventeenth century industry of slicing marble to reveal images imbedded in their veins, which found a ready market among Nordic monarchs, was a kind of pre-photographic urge for the natural image.<sup>11</sup> Jorn was quite imperceptive of the photograph's value as an art object, using it largely as means of transportation. At the same time he compared it to the dubious Italian industry of marble slicing, and reading tealeaves, which does not indicate a profound belief in the referentiality of the medium. Although he used the medium extensively, Jorn's standing on photography's phenomenological status can seem ambiguous or hard to grasp.

From the fact that Franceschi was the photographer of the Institute it can be concluded that Jorn and the Institute were determined to have good photographs. Franceschi was one of the best in the field of photographic documentation of art and architecture. The photographs from *Signes Gravés sur les églises de L'Eure et du Calvados* reprinted in *Tegn og Underlige Gerninger* are marvellous images and they are given space accordingly. The use of the photographs is not indifferent, it is characterised by an urge to vandalise them. The continuous disconnection of the photographs from historical chronology in favour of a purely visual order could be called an act of vandalism, against a medium so strongly tied up with history as a discipline. The disconnection of the surface sign from the solid object could also be seen as vandalism against a medium so tied up with catching the solid in the Cartesian web. This effect observed generally in the illustrations of *Tegn og Underlige Gerninger* is enhanced in the reprint of Franceschi's photographs from *Signes Gravés sur les églises de L'Eure et du Calvados*. Here the lines and figures carved into the stone are emphasised by red lines on the photographs drawn by Jorn.

## Perceptions of Photography in the Modern Project

When Jorn felt an urge to vandalise the photographs it must have been because the photographic act was not satisfactory as vandalism in itself. The photographic vandalism is premeditated; it works within the program of the apparatus and within a set language of referentiality and truth. While at the same time the photographic print is, what Jorn would call, a mannerist object of pretence and illusion, concerned with effect rather than meaning. Photography was invented within and is a product of a tradition of knowledge far from the Nordic; although it does, as Jorn argues, comply very well with the Nordic inclination towards the *natural*. Keeping a vandalising distance to photography is not contrary to the previous convictions of Jorn. Situationism was initially defined around the *spectacle*, which was the abusive symbolic apparatus of the establishment. The photographic image was seen as a part of that apparatus, and it is represented along with other types of mass media imagery in the two assemblage works of Asger Jorn and Guy Debord: *Fin de Copenhague* and

*Memoires*.<sup>12</sup> Another example of Situationist perceptions of photographic media is Guy Debord's 1952 film *Howling in favour of Sade*, consisting of completely blank black and white screens.

In *10000 years of Scandinavian Folk Art* Jorn moves a lot closer to the canonical form of the Modernism, which Situationism, as well as comparative vandalism, defines itself in opposition to. Peter Shield suggests André Malraux's *Psychologie de l'Art. Le Musée Imaginaire* as a previous example of this kind of comparative argument using photographs.<sup>13</sup> Although Malraux does not use photographs to the extent that Jorn does, they do play an important part in his project. The term *le musée imaginaire* implies the prospect of using the substitutional abilities of the medium to create an alternative museum, to institutionalise the alternative interpretation. The difference between the Museum of Malraux and the Institute of Jorn lies in the geographical focus but does have wider implications. By having a global or international focus Malraux plays photography like an objective truth set above or beyond interpretation. Jorn on the other hand digs himself into a specified area, a certain sign-system, in which photography is used to document, in a continuous dialogue, recognising photography as a specific sign-system in itself. This difference is echoed in the choices made in the exposure of the single photographs. In Malraux's Museum the full body view is sought, whereas in the context of Jorn's Institute the close-up of the sign on the object is norm. It is the difference between a general perception of a world of harmonious wholes and a perception of a world of ambiguous compilations. The clashing ambitions of internationalism and regionalism, modernism and counter-modernism are played out in the field of photography, posing questions as to what photography is and what it could be.

<sup>1</sup> A. Jorn, *Luck and Chance. Dagger and Guitar*, 1963; *Value and Economy. Critique of the economic policy and exploitation of the unique*, 1962; *The Natural Order of Things. De Divisione Naturae*, 1962; *Alpha and Omega. Second to None*, (written 1963-64) 1980; *Thing and Polis*, (written 1964) 1980. Cited in the order Jorn intended them to be read.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Shield analyses the reports as a formulation of an artistic philosophy in his *Comparative Vandalism. Asger Jorn and the artistic attitude to life*, Copenhagen/ London 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Shield compares this structure to postmodern columns in P. Shield, 'Om at læse Jorn' [About Reading Jorn] in P.H. Hansen (ed.), *A Bibliography of Asger Jorn's writings*, Silkeborg (DK) 1988, 19.

<sup>4</sup> This Example was used in the speech to the Student Union of Copenhagen University reproduced as first chapter in *Thing and Polis*.

<sup>5</sup> Troels Andersen, 'Didrik', in C. Gether, P. Hovdenakk and S. Høholt (ed.), *Asger Jorn*, exh. cat. Arken Museum of Modern Art, Denmark 2002, 139-142.

<sup>6</sup> Citation of Thomas d'Aquino in A. Jorn, *Tegn og Underlige Gerninger: nogle tanker om middelalderlig kunst i Norden og hvad dertil hører* [Signs and Strange Deeds: Thoughts on Medieval Art in Scandinavia and Related Topics], Valby (DK) 1970, 43. My translation from Danish. Citation referred to in Joan Evans, *Blüte des Mittelalters*, Verlag Droemer Knauer, page not specified.

<sup>7</sup> The Danish titles are: Erik Cinthio, Gérard Franceschi and Asger Jorn, *Skånes Stensculpturer under 1100-talet* [11th Century Stonesculptures of Skåne], Valby (DK) 1995; Poul Grønder Hansen, Asger Jorn and Gérard Franceschi, *Nordens Gyldne Billeder fra Ældre Middelalder* [Golden Images of Scandinavian older Middel Ages], Valby (DK) 1999; Tinna Møbjerg, Jens Rossing, Gérard Franceschi and Asger Jorn, *Folkekunst i Grønland gennem 1000 år* [Folk Art in Greenland throughout 10000 Years], Valby (DK) 2001; Gérard Franceschi, Asger Jorn and Oddgeir Hoftun, *Stavkirkerne – og det norske middelaldersamfundet* [The Log Churches – and Norwegian Medieval Society], Valby (DK) 2002.

<sup>8</sup> I am referring to some photographs of Norwegian wooden churches, these are strangely not listed in the attributions, but they strongly resemble Gerard Franceschi's photographs for the recent publication *Stavkirkerne – og det norske middelaldersamfundet* [Log Churches – and the Norwegian Medieval Society] on the same subject.

<sup>9</sup> This characteristic of the photographs is emphasized by Jorn in A. Jorn, 'Ting og sager. Et forsøg i sammenlignende vandalisme' [Bric a Brac. An attempt in Comparative Vandalism], *Paletten*, No.1, 1967, 6.

<sup>10</sup> A. Jorn, *Tegn og Underlige Gerninger*, 77. Jorn is referring to Niels Højlund, *Træskulpturer fra danske landsbykirker* [Woodsculpture from Danish village churches].

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>12</sup> A. Jorn, *Fin de Copenhagen*, Guy Debord [adviser in Psychogeography], Copenhagen: Permild & Rosengreen, 1957; Guy Ernest Debord, *Memoires*, see note 1.

<sup>13</sup> André Malraux, *Psychologie de l'Art. Le Musée Imaginaire*, Paris 1949.